Designing a Qualitative research Project: Identifying research Goals

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Background: Defining the field

- What makes humans different from other living creatures and non-human objects?

- Humans are endowed with the ability to ascribe meaning to the world around them…
  - Construct Cultures
  - Hold Values
  - Build Relationships

- We create meaningful contexts for our actions
To understand why people do what they do, you have to understand what it means to them.

- **Language:**
  - People make sense out of the world around them through language.
  - What are some examples in Zambia?
    - Who is family and who is not?

- **Symbols (semiotics)**
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- Imagine seeing this image without knowing the meaning...

- What are some important symbols/cultural identifiers in Zambian ag?
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- How do quantitative studies address questions of meaning?
  - Generally they don’t…
  - Utility
    - Universal
    - A representation of preferences
    - Assumed to be expressed through behaviors
- What is missing here?
  - Context
  - Process: why this outcome and not another?
What is are qualitative methods?
- Contextually sensitive
- Inductive rather than deductive
- Naturalistic: research does not manipulate the research setting
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- Areas of application of qualitative research:
  - Description and interpretation of events
  - Theory generation and development
  - Cultural, institutional, and political economic studies

- Qualitative tools:
  - Qualitative data are textual:
    - Interviews
    - Documents
    - Observation
    - Discussion and action research (focus groups, role playing)
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- Can qualitative methods be rigorous?

- 5 components of a Qualitative Research Project (Maxwell 2005)
  1. Goals
  2. Conceptual framework
  3. Research questions
  4. Methods
  5. Validity
The 5 components

- Things to keep in mind before we begin:
  - The components are not “steps”: This is not a linear process, it is iterative
  - Throughout the design and implementation you must understand the ideal strategy, but acknowledge what is feasible:
    - Resources
    - Skills
    - Time
    - Setting
Interactive Model of Research Design

- Goals
- Conceptual Framework
- Research Questions
- Methods
- Validity

Source: Maxwell 2005
Component 1: Developing Research Goals

- Three types of Goals:
  - Personal
    - How do your personal goals inform your research
    - Source of bias?
  - Practical
    - Changing a policy direction
    - Achieving a certain outcome
  - Intellectual
    - Focused on understanding something
    - What is going on and why??
Intellectual Goals

- Qualitative Methods Particularly Well-Suited for:
  1. Understanding the meaning of events, situations, actions etc…
     - Not just the event or the outcome…
     - How do respondents make sense of these and how does this influence their behavior.
  - What are some examples where understanding the meaning of an event or activity will provide us useful insights?
2. Understanding the context:

- How does the context shape the activity?
- How does the activity shape the context?
- Important to think about your scale of analysis.

- From your research what are interesting contextual factors at the
  - Household-level:
  - Regional:
  - National:
3. Generating “Grounded Theories”:

- Qualitative methods often used to design questionnaires and identify new variables
- Testing concepts and hypotheses
- Identifying unanticipated phenomena:
  - Inductive analysis
4. Understanding the process by which an event or action takes place:
   - Quantitative methods are good at describing outcomes, but often poor at identifying the processes leading to the outcome.
   - Qualitative methods are interested in outcomes, but a strength is unpacking how one outcome and not another.
5. Developing causal explanations:

- Some quantitative researchers claim that qualitative methods cannot explain causality
  - This comes from a restrictive view of causality focused on regularities in relationships between variables
  - But what if we think of causality in terms of processes and mechanisms?
- What are some examples from your research where causality might be better understood using qualitative methods?
Qualitative Research Goals

To develop your research proposal think about your practical, personal, and intellectual goals. Answer these questions:

- Why is your study worth doing?
- What issues do you want to clarify and what policies do you want to influence?
- Why do YOU want to conduct this study?
- Why should we care about the results?
Assignment

- Begin your proposal:
  - Describe the goals of your research
  - Narrative or graphic conceptual framework